1: Gorer J-5 (1937)1938 AK5 Lepcha AK5

CHAPTER ONE

THE LEPCHAS AND SIKKIM

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THE Lepchas[1] are a Mongoloid people living in the Himalayas on the southern and eastern slopes of Mount Kinchenjunga. It seems certain that they were originally the only inhabitants of this large tract of mountainous land, but during the last three centuries, or possibly longer, their land has been taken from them by conquering invaders, the Tibetans, the Nepali, and finally the English. At the time of the 1931 census the 25,780 registered Lepchas were almost evenly divided between the Native State of Sikkim and the Darjeeling district of British India, 13,000 being in Sikkim and the rest in Darjeeling, with the exception of 66 who were employed, chiefly as gardeners, in Calcutta.

There is no generally accepted theory among those anthropologists who believe that every tribe originally came from somewhere else as to the place of origin of the Lepchas. Various parts of Tibet and Mongolia have been suggested and a certain similarity has apparently been found between the Lepcha language and some dialect spoken in Indo-China. The Lepchas themselves have no tradition of migration and place the home of their ancestors—the people of Mayel—in one of the inaccessible valleys of Kinchenjunga.

The Lepchas do not appear ever to have resisted invasion of their own accord. Sikkim was apparently colonised by the Tibetans at some date prior to the beginning of the seventeenth century,[2]

[1] The Lepchas do not call themselves Lepchas; they call themselves *Rong*. 'Lepcha' is said to be a derogatory Nepali term—*lap-che*—meaning, though the philology is doubtful, 'nonsense talkers.' A parallel could be found in the Russian name for Germans—*nemetski*, which means 'the dumb ones.' Since all books dealing with the people and district refer to the Lepchas as Lepchas, it would seem merely pedantic and confusing to use the term *Rong*. The word would appear to have no other significance in Lepcha.

[2] I take the suggestion that Sikkim (which at that date included the present Darjeeling district) was colonised or at least dominated by the Tibetans before the beginning of the seventeenth century from *An Account of Tibet* by the

7: Hooker D-5 (1849-1851) 1854
AK5 Lepcha AK5

Before proceeding to narrate my different expeditions into
Sikkim and Nepal from Dorjiling, I shall give a sketch of the different peoples and races composing the heterogeneous population of Sikkim and the neighbouring mountains.

The Lepcha is the aboriginal inhabitant of Sikkim, and the prominent character in Dorjiling, where he undertakes all sorts of out-door employment. The race to which he belongs is a very singular one; markedly Mongolian in features, and a good deal too, by imitation, in habit; still he differs from his Tibetan prototype, though not so decidedly as from the Nepalese and Bhotanese, between whom he is hemmed into a narrow tract of mountain country, barely 60 miles in breadth. The Lepchas possess a tradition of the flood, during which a couple escaped to the top of a mountain (Tendong) near Dorjiling. The earliest traditions which they have of their history date no further back than some three hundred years, when they describe themselves as having been long-haired, half-clad savages. At about that period they were visited by Tibetans, who introduced Boodh worship, the platting of their hair into pig-tails, and very many of their own customs. Their physiognomy is however so Tibetan in its character, that it cannot be supposed that this was their earliest intercourse with the trans-nivean races: whether they may have wandered from beyond the snows before the spread of Boodhism and its civilisation, or whether they are a cross between the Tamulian of India and the Tibetan, has not been decided. Their language, though radically identical with Tibetan, differs from it in many important particulars. They, or at least some of their tribes, call themselves Rong, and Arratt, and their country Dijong: they once possessed a great part of East Nepal, as far west as the Tambur river, and at a still earlier period they penetrated as far west as the Arun river.

10: Waddell G-5 (1891) 1899 AK5 Lepcha AK5

and seem to have entered their present country from 'Further-India' by way of the Asam valley; and they appear to be an outlying member of that group of wild tribes which are broadly known by their Indian title of *Naga* that is the hill-savages [1]). They are especially near the 'Arleng' or Mikir-Nagas of the Garo- and Kasia-hills, to the South of the Brahmaputra-valley, and have much in common with the *Ching-pô* or *Sing-po* — the 'Ka-chins' of the Burmese — as well as with that branch of the Malayan Indo-Chinese which has been named by the late Captain Forbes, the Mon-Anam family. Even linguistically they do not belong to the Tibetan group at all.

The Lepchas call themselves '*Rong*' which may be considered as their true tribal name; and it means in their vernacular 'an occupant', in the sense of aborigines or autochthones of the area. They have no tradition of having come from any other country and know nothing of their origin. The earliest mention we have of them is in Tibetan history which records them as inhabiting this country on the Tibetan invasion about 250 years. The term Lepcha or properly Lapcha or 'Lapcho' is a Nepalese word, the contemptuous epithet applied to this tribe by their Nepalese neighbours. And it seems to me to mean 'the vile-speakers' [2]), because the Lepchas are the only tribe of the pre-Tibetan mongoloids of the Himalayas of Nepal and its borders, who have not adopted the externals of Hinduism and the Hindi dialect, the Parbatiya. The Tibetans, on the other hand, call the Lepchas, the 'people of the *Mon*-country' (*Mon-pa*, *Mon-rigs*, vulgarly *Mô-rik*), which is the general Tibetan name for the Lower Himalayas from Kumaon on the north-west to Asam in the south-east, as well as for Upper Burma. This name is doubtless related to the pre-Burmese inhabitants of Burma, the Mon or "Talaigno" who are now pressed down to the coast-line of Pegu.

The current name of the country, namely "Sikhim" [3]), is also Nepalese. The Lepchas call it 'the *Ne* country', or Ne-lyang, which is usually interpreted trough the Tibetan as 'the place of caves'. Caves, however, are not numerous in the tract occupied by the Lepchas. Possibly this name was originally applied to the whole of this part of the Himalaya, as the tract adjoining on the west is still called the country of the *Ne*-wars, that is 'the people of *Né*'; whilst the affix 'pal' of the modern name of the country of the Newars, to wit, *Ne-pal*, curiously forms the old Tibetan name for that country, the modern name of which, it seems to me, may be derived from the juxta-position of these 'Ne' and 'Pal' countries.

The language of the Lepchas can scarcely be said to possess a written character. The so-called Lepcha character I found in 1891 (when investigating the history of the country for my section of the Sikhim Gazetteer), was invented only at the beginning of last century [4]) by a Lama-king of Sikhim, with a view to convert the Lepchas to Lamaism. He

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[1]) From the Sanskrit *Naga*, a hill; the word, as applied to hillmen, covers the sense of naked hill-savages (*Nanga*), and the myth which associates these wild hillmen or *Nagas* with snakes or *Naga* is, I believe, comparatively modern and Brahmanical in origin.

[2]) It has its parallel in the Anglo-Saxon epithet of ‚Welsh' or ‚the Jabberers', the contemptuous term applied by the English to their less civilised neighbours in Wales; also perhaps ‚Barbarian' from bar-bar, onomatopoetic for gibberish. Cf. Taylor's ‚Names and Places', London, p. 67.

[3]) The most trustworthy form is 'Sikhim', not 'Sikkim'.

[4]) This fact was recorded by me in 1892 in my Section of the *Gazetteer of Sikhim*, but during the process of editing it got transferred with other notes of mine to the Chapters compiled by Mr. Paul (pp. 1—39), where it will be found at page 13 under the head of the Lama in question — Pag-dor Nam-gyal, who was the priest king of Sikhim, born 1686, died 1717 A. D.

192 denotes the chief objects in nature and their relationships, the trees, plants and animals, and suffices for their easily satisfied physical wants. A characteristic and suggestive word is their name for a 'hunter' which is 'the flesh-meat-pursuing father' (*Maon-riük-bo*) and the word father itself means 'the giver'. There are so few abstract names, that it is almost impossible to express many abstract ideas in their language. Hence the first Lepcha book, the *Tashe sung* or 'Scripture of the Lepcha God *Tashi*', which was composed by a 192 Tibetan Lama and which treated of Lamaistic Buddhism, was forced to borrow words 114 freely from the Tibetan. Indeed the second part of this book-title is pure Tibetan. The large extent to which this borrowing has been carried on in the so-called Lepcha books was not fully realized by Mr. MAINWARING. For I found, on inspecting his manuscript Lepcha-English Dictionary, that fully half of the words which he believed to be Lepcha were in reality Tibetan, either pure primitive Tibetan, or the corrupt Sikhimese dialect of this latter language [1]), and the inclusion of such words tended to mislead in that it made the Lepcha appear somewhat similar in roots and structure to the Tibetan while it is in fact very different.

The very ancient nature of their songs is evident from the fact that they preserve 533 many archaic words and phrases, the meaning of which is now completely forgotten by 192 the Lepchas themselves, who, however, still pride themselves in using them, although they no longer know their sense.

These archaic words and phrases usually occupy the position of adjectives or qualifying phrases, or nouns in opposition, which are prefixed or affixed to a word possessing a well known meaning, so that these archaic words are treated as redundant. They are called by Mr. MAINWARING 'figurative' expressions, and he instances as an example the phrases 'to close the eyes' and 'to be a stiff one' as prefixes to the root 'to die' whilst the affixes are considered by him to be mere 'expletives' and often without 'distinct signification'. To some extent they are perhaps metaphorical, [2]) though generally, I think, they may prove to be descriptive.

●101 One of the commonest of these so-called *Tang-bor* expressions is the prefix to the 192 tribal name, namely '*Mo-tan-chi' Rong*. If you ask a Lepcha, what is a "Rong", what is the meaning of '*Mo-tan-chi*', he always replies that is has no meaning or sense whatever. To me however it seems, that the first two syllables are clearly the roots for 'Mother' and 'flesh' (*Mo* + *tan*); and *chi* although now ordinarily used for 'spirit' in liquor, may originally have meant animal spirits, 'inspirited or cheerful'. Thus the designation of the tribe would mean 'the (one) Mother-flesh (or consanguineous) jolly Lepchas'; if his hypothesis be correct, and it has much in its favour, the prominence herein given in the tribal designa-

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[1]) Thus '*Sa-ni-ing*' is given as Lepcha and the equivalent of Tibetan *ŋ'gag 'ts'al*, to pray; but both these phrases are Tibetan and neither of them really means to pray — the last being a salutation with the hands, and the former is the vulgar Sikhimese pronunciation of the Tibetan *gsol-ba-deb*, to make a request. Cf. JÄSCHKE's Dict. 279.

Such words will doubtless be omitted by Professor GRÖNWEDEL in editing this unquestionable valuable work of Mr. M. And it is to be hoped that the forthcoming dictionary may be arranged in the order of the European alphabet so as to make it more generally useful as a work of reference; for Lepcha, as we have seen, has practically no character of its own, and certainly to print its vocabulary in the order of the Indian alphabet seems undesirable, as the language is structurally so different from either the Indian or Tibetan.

[2]) The Kafir speech frequently employs metapherical expressives. MAX MÜLLER's Science of Language 8th ed. II. 275.

101 192 tion to the word 'Mother' is interesting, because customs are to be found amongst the Lepchas which appear to be vestiges of the primitive-social institution of Matriarchy or the mother-ship of clans; whilst this institution still flourishes amongst their co-related tribes in the neighbouring Garo-hills, who trace their descent through their mothers and not 192 through their fathers. Thus, as apparent vestiges of matriarchy amongst the Lepchas, I 581 find still surviving the usage of female suitorship, in which the young woman proposes marriage by offering to the man selected a basket of eggs; personal inclination in the choice of a husband; monogamy as a rule only relaxed in case the wife proves barren, [531] tribal endogamy, avoidance of girl's mother, and not unfrequent Teknonymy whereby the father is called after his child — thus the father of Tak-li-ap (*Tak-li-ap bo*). Moreover all the tribal groups (*a-giŕ*), of which there are several scores, bear the affix 'mother' 103 (*mo*) [1]), although the proper name in this group title is territorial, the name of a particular 192 valley or glen or hillside; and their grouping is itself merely territorial and has no significance as to marriage or true tribal division. Instances of such groups are 'The Wormwood mother' (*Tak-ñel-mo*), for the locality of this hamlet is exceptionally overgrown with wormwood; 'The Foot mother' (*Sang-dyang-mo*): this hamlet is one of the very few which lies at the *foot* of the tropical forge of the Tista-river; 'the Stockade mother' (*Tung-sung-mo*) this village near Darjiling occupies the site of an old stockade; 'the sloping-field mother' (*Ling-tam-mo*), 'the Namchi mother' (*Nam tsii-mo*), and thus we also have 'the Darjiling mother' for those born at Darjiling (*Darjeling-mo*). The only group of the tribe, 101 it may be added, which does not bear this affix of 'mother' is the highest section or 192 *A-den-pan-tso* [2]) from which, as its name denotes, the kings (*Pano*) and the ministers (*A-den*) used to be drawn — now however its members have a preponderating strain of Tibetan blood.

As instances of others of these archaic words and phrases whose meanings have been 192 forgotten by the Lepchas, but which seem to me to be apparently of a descriptive character, may be cited the words and phrases qualifying 'fields' and 'world', namely '*Ku-ran-mii*' and '*zor*'. In the former the words literally read 'bosom-stone-below', which would read 'the fields on the bosom of stone underneath.' The prefix *Ku* also is used for 'clothes', with the same meaning as Tibetan '*gō*', (gos) a coat, and *gur*, a tent, in either case would give the sense of 'the fields clothing the bosom of the stones'. Whilst the word joined to 'world' means 'rain' (*zo* or *so*, which is literally applicated to the Lepcha part of the world as it is one of the rainiest sites on the globe; but probably it also meant originally the rain of the eyes or *tears*, and was perhaps thus used by the weary toiling Lepcha in the pessimistic sense of 'tearful world'.

[194] The homonymic character of the language also, would suggest the possibility that some of these archaic words were descriptive as in the tonic Chinese and Burmese, such as 'the *flat-thing* plate', 'the *round-thing* bottle' etc. It is to be hoped that this interesting question will be pursued by philologists.

776 The spirits and deities of the tribe are referred to in these songs, and require a little description, as they show the primitive conception of the Lepchas in regard to God, and the deification of natural objects and of their ancestors. The Lepcha gods and godlings are

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[1]) Not *Mung* as stated by Mr. Risley (loc. cit. IV. Appendix 69); this word means 'devil'.
[2]) The affix *tso* is interpreted as 'stock or lineage'.

11;Hermanns M-5 (1951)1954
AK5 Lepcha AK5

CHAPTER III

THE MOUNTAIN TRIBES OF SIKKIM

A. The Lepchas

The Lapches or Lepchas are supposed to be the original inhabitants of Sikkim. They call themselves Rong; the Tibetans call them Mon, and the Bhutanese, Meri. The Mongoloid problem can best be studied through the Lepchas of the Southern Himalayas and hence they are dealt with more thoroughly.

According to one opinion the Lepchas are supposed to have come not from Tibet, but from the east of the mountains from Assam and Upper Burma.[22] Their own tradition, however, states that their original home was in the neighbourhood of the great mountain, Kang-chen-mdzod-lnga[23] the second highest mountain in the world. That is the Tibetan name and means the "Great Glacier of the Five Store-rooms." The Lepcha name for the mountain is, "King-tzum-song-bu." King-tzum means "Highest part of the forehead," song-bu means "the highest." Literally it means, "the highest over our head." This Lepcha name is reproduced phonetically by the Tibetans as "Kang-chen-mdzod-lnga," which has quite a different meaning. This snow-covered mountain has an important part to play as the habitat of the spirits. King-tzum-rum is the god of happiness; Rum-king-tzum is the god of fate.[24] From it the Lepchas derive the name Rong, by which they are known. Rong means "peak" or "mountain peak" and has the same significance as the word Arong.

Another tradition has it that the place of their origin is on the holy mountain Kailasa (Ti se) way up in Tibet. On the mountain is the stone Ne-long which bears the footprints of Buddha and of animals. The god, Pum-rum, protector of the hunters, lives there. Pum-rum is also another name for the Supreme God of the Lepchas as we shall soon see. The

22. J. C. White, Sikkim and Bhutan, London, 1909, p. 7.
23. Kangchenjunga, Fig. 17 & 18.
24. G. B. Mainwaring and A. Grünwedel, Dictionary of the Lepcha Language, Berlin 1898, 17a, 356 b.

[p. 29]

11:Hermanns M-5 (1951)1954
AK5 Lepcha AK5

in other places. The Rong women are not so simple as to be taken in by such a man-made legend. They, on the contrary, affirm that the sexual maturity of girls and the development of the secondary sex characteristics occur without sexual relationship with man. The only difference is that the breasts of the girl who had had sexual relationship with man would produce some milk. The Maharaja of Sikkim and other educated Sikkimese, who read Gorer's book, found his description to be a defamation of the Lepcha character.

The Lepchas are the descendants of the first brother Lepcha, as reported above. They fall into three divisions, which are named after the districts in which they live. The Ilame Lepchas live in the Ilame district of Nepal; the Dandjung Lepchas on the other side of the Tista river in Sikkim; the Dam-sang Lepchas in Indian Sikkim and Bhutan. The second brother was called God-she, and is the father of the Jimdar tribe. The third was Meche, and he is the protoparent of the Meche. Each of these three have a different language.[113]

B. Sikkim Yak-tamba

There is in Sikkim a class of people who are called Limbu by the Nepalese and Tzong-pa by the Tibetans. They call themselves Yak-tamba, Ek-tamba and Ek-tambu. Tradition has it that, after the Lepchas, they are the oldest inhabitants of the place having settled there before the Tibetans and the Nepalese came to settle in the land. They are intermixed with the Rong in a very remarkable manner. At the present time they inhabit the land to the west as far as the river Arun as we have already pointed out before. They are regarded as divisions of the Limbu and bear a very close resemblance to them. The Yak-tamba have flatter faces and more Mongoloid features than the Lepchas.

C. The Bhodja of Sikkim

The Tibetans who migrated into Sikkim are called the Sikkim Bhodja. Legend links the Tibetan Je-khye-bu-

113. cfr. the report of the Rai given above concerning the first parents and their three sons; see p. 7, 38. Here we have the same content of the myth.

[pp. 110 – 159 not processed]

5. Lepcha

197 The Lepcha kinship terminology presents a distinctive set of problems not previously encountered in our review of the field. Our data on the Lepcha, both linguistic and ethnographic, are fairly adequate, and this situation in itself constitutes something of a novelty. Gorer has contributed a remarkable study of Lingthem, a Lepcha village in Zongu (Sikkim) in which Lepcha culture has been preserved as a relatively homogeneous unit. Morris has written a popular account involving some of the same material, and the folklore has been studied by Stocks. Both Gorer and Stocks give lists of kinship terms, which agree in most respects and tend to supplement one another. On the ethnographic side, Gorer gives us a complete picture of clan organization, marriage regulations, kin behaviour, etc. Stocks' article includes scattered notes on Lepcha customs, and marriageable and non-marriageable kin are indicated as such in her list of terms, but this material includes a number of obvious errors and is not entirely trustworthy; Gorer remarks (p. 41) that her notes "correspond in practically no particular with my observations". On the linguistic side, the grammar and dictionary of Mainwaring, the latter carefully edited by Grünwedel, supply a rich storehouse of raw material, perhaps as important a single source as any in this general field. Gorer's unkind remarks (pp. 39 sq.) can scarcely be justified, especially in view of the fact that his own incorrect forms